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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: ALL THE NEWS FIT TO BE PRESENTED BY YOUR ORGANIZATION'S
DESIGNATED SPOKESPERSON

Ref: A) HANOI 1016; B) HANOI 2996; C) HANOI 2705; D) HANOI 2412; E)

HANOI 771

HANOI 00001070 001.2 OF 002

Summary

¶1. (SBU) The GVN recently issued a decree prohibiting all government and Party employees, except ministers, provincial governors or appointed spokespeople, from speaking to the media. The GVN's reported intent in passing the decree is to decrease "controversy" and prevent "conflicting information" from coming out of different GVN ministries. However, journalists from State-run press outlets lament that government-appointed spokespersons may be "overloaded" with requests for information or "not expert" in their fields. A respected journalist wrote that the decree presents "obstacles" for reporters in trying to inform the public. We see the decree as fitting a larger GVN pattern -- since last year's Party Congress -- to reign in the press and ensure that only the "right news" sees the light of day. End Summary.

The Decree's Nuts and Bolts

¶2. (SBU) Vietnamese Prime Minister (PM) Nguyen Tan Dung recently signed a decree prohibiting all civil servants, except ministers, provincial governors or appointed spokespeople, from speaking to the media. The decree codifies several procedures journalists must go through before being granted an interview, but it does not specify punishments for those officials who provide information without permission. The decree also requires ministries, government agencies and provincial and city people's committees to update information on their websites at least once every three months or hold a press conference once every six months.

A Mixed Review

¶3. (SBU) On June 7, a Ministry of Culture and Information (MOCI) Press Management Officer told us that the GVN had decided "a long time ago" to issue this decree, but that the "slow and plodding GVN bureaucracy" had not finalized language until recently. The rationale behind it is to decrease "controversy" and prevent "conflicting information" from coming out of the different GVN ministries, she said.

¶4. (SBU) The decree will improve journalists' access to information by making it clearer where they can get it, she continued. The GVN is merely making sure certain individuals are assigned the task of speaking for their department or Party organization. It is not

unlike foreign government departments that have individuals acting as department spokespersons, she offered.

15. (SBU) However, reporters from State-controlled Vietnam Television Network and the Voice of Vietnam bemoaned the decree's passing. They told us that department-appointed spokespersons may be "overloaded" with requests or "not expert" in their respective fields. Moreover, the new procedures will be time-consuming, but the media business demands that they get information immediately, they added. They asserted that the GVN has made the task of getting good information more complicated.

16. (SBU) Respected journalist Binh Chau lamented in a June 4 commentary in the "Vietnam Investment Review" that Article Two of the decree states that only authorized officers can supply information to the media and that these officers are not allowed to reveal "secrets or secret information about ongoing investigations." The decree presents "obstacles" for journalists trying to carry out their job of informing the public, she wrote.

17. (SBU) A senior officer in the Vietnam Journalists Association (VJA), however, told us that it is too early to judge the decree's impact. If it becomes clear that it has prevented journalists from getting timely information, the VJA will notify PM Dung and other relevant GVN leaders of the VJA's views, he said.

In Keeping With Past Practice

18. (SBU) Third-country embassy officials have publicly criticized the decree, saying it runs counter to GVN promises of promoting transparency and accountability. On June 6, the Swedish Ambassador said that the decree undermines the training Sweden has given to Vietnamese journalists over the past several years. The Swedish Embassy's Political and Trade Counselor later offered her view to Poloff that the decree is in keeping with GVN steps over the past year to deter the press from printing certain information.

HANOI 00001070 002.2 OF 002

Comment

19. (SBU) Over the past year, the GVN has lauded the media's work in uncovering official corruption. However, there can be too much of a good thing, and the public outcry in response to the PMU-18 scandal (reftels) -- fanned by the media -- caught the GVN by surprise. Since taking office after last year's Party Congress, GVN and Party leaders have sought to ensure -- through this decree and other "press guidance" -- that only the "right news" comes out at the right time. End Comment.

MARINE